SHAKING + QUAKING + BREAKING THE BOUGHS:
DECONSTRUCTING FAMILY WITH DIGITAL VISUAL CULTURE MEDIA

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Abstract

Master narratives of family tangle inseparably with dominant sociocultural discourses of sexual identity, gender, race, class, and others to organize and enforce cultural norms (Gee, 1992; Geertz, 1973; Gergen, 1995). In today's "technomediated culture" (Carpenter & Taylor, 2003, p. 48), digital media can perpetuate oppressive dominant discourses or promote social justice. Hypertext, as a digital process and product, can be used to deconstruct dominant oppressive identity discourses, creating potential for increasing sociocultural equity. Glenn Ligon's online work, *Annotations*, a digital family album, demonstrates hypertext's deconstructive potential to envision alternatives to patriarchy, encourage an awareness of multiple narratives and knowledges, and provide options that envision multiple, divergent discourses and subjectivities outside culturally-defined norms. I deconstruct family relationships and interactions from my own family photo albums, and provide examples of how artists have used hypermedia as subjective platforms to reflectively re-negotiate their concepts of self, and, in turn, re-imagine concepts of family.

Introduction

Digital visual culture (e.g., Flickr, FaceBook, MySpace) enables the availability of genealogical records, and the ability to share photos, stories, and correspondence among family members. (Re)viewing or sharing the family album can involve narrating what is (not) shown in the photographs and what exceeds iconic representations of what is considered important or special to record in photographs. The stories exist around and between family photographs and their surface discourses, and around the absences in traditional or digital family albums. Critical questions to pose in deconstructing family photos include: Who took the photos and under what conditions? Who is excluded? Who is (mis)represented and how? Who assembled the album? What immediately preceded or followed the event photographed? How are different identities represented in the album? These questions can guide an exploration of gender and sexuality identity issues from a critical art education pedagogical practice (see Guyas, 2007; Ulkuniemi, 2008).

Deconstructing Family Photo Albums

Andersen (1991) suggests deconstructing dominant discourses, starting with master narratives around cultural and historical systems, most notably family relationships, because they become the basis for artificial norms and judgments. Family norms dictate available cultural identities—we must all fit into *family* somehow, but what performances do these identities require? What, or who, gets excluded or goes unnamed?

The nuclear family has never dominated actual demographics, only our imaginations. Actual families are extended and unstable and positions shift across time. Yet even when master myths, like the nuclear family, are discredited they remain influential icons (Andersen, 1991). Deconstructing socio-cultural identities and subjectivities creates options outside of narrow hegemonic norms for new, different, and evolving ideas and identities (Andersen, 1991). Deconstructing discourses around family provides a venue for examining relationships, stereotypes, cultural influences, and identities.

From a deconstructive perspective, *identity* becomes *subjectivity*, a collection of fluctuating, slippery, contingent, contested, and multiple identity facets (Anderson, 2009). Subjectivity is relational, and intimately correlated with our multiple family roles, recorded and constructed in family albums and photographs (Trafí, 2008). Butler (1991, 2004) insists subjectivity consists of performing multiple, contradictory, fluid identity expressions that masquerade as natural, particularly cultural constructions of, sexual identity and gender. Straight males become fathers who metaphorically become heads of households, with all the attendant benefits and obligations. In most cultures, all other sexual identities and gender expressions have less power and status, particularly those that threaten the patriarchal status quo.

Dominant discourses and master narratives insinuate their *a priori* status and authority (Foucault, 1969/1972). Deconstructing them requires deliberate effort to identify, explore, and disrupt daily habitual practices (Jensen, Bryson, & de Castell, 2003). Deconstruction exposes their gaps and omissions, opening space for multiple possibilities, questions, and perspectives, demonstrating the fluidity of meaning/s (Butler, 1991, 2004; Derrida, 1959/1978; Faulconer, 1998; Jensen, Bryson, & de Castell, 2003). It presents a framework for reviewing, revisiting, and (re)constructing the past/present, with the hope of constructing a different present/future. Digital technology offers increasingly powerful, user-friendly, accessible means and media for deconstructing master narratives of family.

Digital Photography

Digital cameras revolutionized images and digital media has exponentially multiplied the ability and access to capture, store, reproduce, manipulate, print, and transmit images and visual texts. We take more pictures, but we print less, yet we circulate pictures more broadly. Technology can reveal subjectivity's construction and fluidity (Halberstam, 1991; Haraway, 1985/1991; Hopkins, 1998). Contemporary artists' works (e.g., Lynn Herschman Leeson, Margot Lovejoy) provide a rich investigation—exploring, comparing, and raising issues around the ways

contemporary digital media continue, maintain, challenge, and change subjectivity construction.

Family albums now proliferate electronically, with over 111,000,000 family album Internet sites as of September 2009.[1] Many allow individuals to re-construct and re-present their private lives and families for progressively expanding voyeuristic viewing. Photos that previously circulated among a select, semi-private group of individuals can now be posted online for anyone to view and consume at any time and from any distance. Moreover, Web 2.0's ability to "tag" (and "untag") photos, as on Flickr and Facebook, presents a way to continually disrupt the singular narratives of a fixed set of family photographs. What does it mean to post these texts online? What happens when family albums have near-infinite distribution and access capabilities? How does digitization affect dominant identity discourses?

The Family Album:
A Visual Cultural Record and Mandate of Identity

Since the 19th century, family albums have been a primary device for assembling family photos into culturally-appropriate narratives. Flynn (2002) characterizes assembling family albums as a "process of editing images into icons" through the inclusion, exclusion, framing, ordering, composition, and accompaniment, or absence of text/s. The result is fragmented, fractured narratives cobbled from "a series of past unrelated moments, stories and anecdotes" to generate a "story of domestic lives" with "images of conflicts, difficulties and labor" erased (Flynn, 2002, pp. 4-6). In the following visual essay, I deconstruct family relationships and interactions from my own family albums.

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1   This family album count is the result of a Google Internet search on September 14th, 2009, using the search term *family album site*.

Mud Masks Conflict (see Figure 1)

Figure 1. Muddy Kids

In "muddy kids," I am the forward facing figure on the right. I am playing in my grandmother Mema's backyard with cousins in a mud pit that we created. Her house was a hotbed of childhood hedonism. All cousin gatherings, like the one in this photo, were adventuresome, near anarchic, mayhem. We ran gleefully rampant. But this photo masks many family conflicts. Two cousins are not allowed to stay overnight by paternal proclamation. Another's parents are close to divorce. My father's temper was easily provoked. Conflict always bubbled uneasily beneath the surface in this family.

Troublingly, the muddiness of this activity, and its signification of the fun of being allowed to be "kids" and play like this at Mema's masks the domestic labor that it will require. Some heterosexual female/s— Mema, one, or all of our mothers—will need to clean up the aftermath.

A father might hose us in the yard, but bathing and laundry remained primarily mothers' domains. As "muddy kids" here, we have no reservations about getting filthy without regard for the extra work it means for others, unevenly distributed across sexual identity and gender lines.

Me + My Schlitz (see Figure 2)

Figure 2. Me + My Schlitz

In "me + my schlitz," I grin almost unbearably wide, squinted eyes disappearing into lines, cheeks squeezed upwards, teeth gritted intensely. I hold a Schlitz can in one hand; smiling post-swig. While I still find this picture, and my childhood love of bad beer, amusing, it masks the actual difficulties and conflicts alcohol created in my family. Mema confessed once to my mother, after a stint in city jail, that she had more D.U.I.s (i.e., driving under the influence of alcohol) than she could count on her fingers and toes. This was over two decades before her death. She continued drinking and driving, losing her license several times, and spending two years on house arrest with a two-way video and breathalyzer monitoring system.

Reflecting and Revis(it)ing (see Figure 3)

Figure 3. Three Cousins Reflect

In "three cousins reflect," I appear over 30 years later with two of the cousins from the "muddy kids" photo. Here we look over old photos together the night before Mema's funeral. This image conceals the labor it has taken each of us to come to this place. "Susan," in the middle, labored to forgive a grandmother who, in return for her visits, assistance, and generosity, lashed out at her. "Evelyn," on the right labors to re-insert herself in a family she believed excommunicated her. I labored for years to distance myself because of my sexual identity and my direct knowl-

edge of some relatives' homophobia. This photo documents our attempts to reconnect with our larger family, our past, and our selves.

Family Photographs and Album Hypertexts

Artists use a range of digital technologies to create hypertexts.[2] Hypertexts allow multiple, diverse pathways through texts, reconfiguring traditional information's static, arbitrary organizational structures as a more rhizomatic, active, relational framework (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Digital technology facilitates visual cultural communication with images, which are manipulated and create meaning. As a pre-eminent visual culture artifact, the family photo album provides a ready and significant opportunity for deconstructing a master discourse and its visual documentation.

Artist Examples Using Digital Media to Deconstruct Family

Jo Spence's photographic essay *Beyond the Family Album* analyzes how family photos and albums created by her relatives constructed her "subjectivity in ways that had erased completely her class identity and her family struggle" (Trafí, 2008, p .55). Spence recounts obligatory birthday scene details, replete with smiles, cakes, singing, and candles. On her second birthday, her mother holds Spence in front of the cake; on her third, Spence stands alone, re-creating the smiles and candle-blowing. Her mother's absence seems trivial until you learn that she died in the intervening year (Trafí, 2008). By reconstructing the albums, Spence (1979) literally dismantles narratives about her by other people,

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2   **Hypermediacy** includes multiple immersive and interactive media—images, sound, text, animation, and video—arranged without clear linearity. **Hyperlinks** are digital arrangements of multiple dynamic, active texts, enabling users to choose pathways, build connections between ideas and images, and create multiple possible interpretations, creating a hypertext (Carpenter & Taylor, 2003; Taylor, 2004). These possibilities unleash the potential for multiple transformations. **Hypertexts** potentially create "transgressive spaces where learning, pleasure, passion, and excitement" mix, spaces for alternative discourses (Akins, Check, & Riley, 2004, p. 34).

then questions, rearranges, and revises the texts, constructing new self-reflexive narratives. Digital technologies enabled Spence to reproduce and rearrange family photos, and use them to (re)construct her formerly invisible family narrative.

Bernadette Flynn also employs hypermedia to deconstruct family narratives. In *Meander* (Flynn, 2002), Flynn uses her family albums, home movies, soundscapes, video interviews, and graphic re-constructions to recreate scenes that "resurrect personal recollection from the purely testimonial" she presents online (p. 11). These allow Flynn to (re)cast her evidence and memories into a larger context, making it even more situated, intimate, specific, and personal.

Flynn uses traditional tropes of photography, like the portrait, to foreground herself, but in the reconstructions she attempts to "create another story in the background unsettling any unified family narrative" (p. 11). Flynn presents her family stories primarily from her point of view, edited from a larger body of materials, with attention to their situatedness, intertextuality, partiality, and incompleteness. The presence and acknowledgement of multiple discourses produces discord that disrupts our image of ourselves as central, as the subject, the protagonist. These disruptions provide fertile ground for exploring how to change oppressive master narratives by exposing them and their signifiers as the cultural constructions that they are.

Disruptions around master narratives of *family,* particularly around sexual identity and gender, appeal to me. I grew up White, working class, Methodist, female, and lesbian in a small city outside Atlanta in the 1970s, surrounded by close family. I was bombarded constantly by norms of race, gender, class, and sexual identity, and I was aware from an early age that I disrupted these norms. Predominantly my family accepted and defended my differences, letting me pursue my interests and own identity, regardless of many cultural norms and pressures. I knew and they knew that I didn't fit into stereotypical "family" very easily. As a result of my own struggles with family narratives, I am interested in ways that deconstructing master narratives of family may enable and invite a greater range of family identities. Glenn Ligon's work is a touchstone for my own identity struggles.

Glenn Ligon and the Family Album

an·no·ta·tion (n) – *an explanatory or critical comment that has been added to a text*

In his online work *Annotations*, Glenn Ligon unites hypertext, digital visual culture, and online technology to criticize and invalidate oppressive identity discourses. Using hypertext, Ligon exposes the limitations, gaps, silences, and exclusions of conventional family master narratives, and creates spaces, possibilities, and multiple examples for more equitable inclusive, and respectful discourses around family and subjectivity. In Ligon's continuing investigation of subjectivities, he appropriates the family album form, updating it for a digital medium and age. Ligon challenges the family album to acknowledge divergent possibilities, considering ways his own status as a Black gay male growing up in the United States in the latter 20th century disrupts and exceeds traditional family discourses. *Annotations* acknowledges conventional heterosexual family discourses and provides multiple alter-narratives about the intersections of race, gender, sexual identity, and class.

Annotations exists as an online virtual family album,[3] starting with a washed-out sunset and bird silhouette cover from the not-too-distant past. Viewers enter the work by selecting either the cover or the word "forward" hovering slightly above it. From there, users can choose "next," "previous," or specific pages by number.

My initial viewing of *Annotations* followed conditioned impulses to progress linearly from beginning to end. The requisite pictures, although with primarily African American subjects, fit my expectations so well that I initially failed to notice subtle alter-narratives to traditional dominant discourses of family and race. *Annotations* begins with African American subjects adopting and reflecting dominant discourses and subject positions. Disruptions appear when a few photographs repeat. On page 9 of the digital family album, viewers abruptly confront a large photo featuring a fully nude Black male sitting on a bed. What? This doesn't belong in a family album. I proceed promptly to the next page, returning to what is for me more comfortable content and characters.

3   See http://www.diacenter.org/ligon

On my second viewing, I examined the contents more thoroughly. Some photographs had hyperlinks to additional multimedia texts, literally connecting meaning and extending "the layers of possible interpretations" (Tucker, n.d., n.p.). Alternative texts include captions, stories, quotations, song titles, virtual letters, other photographs, tangential 'layers' of album pages, and audio clips. These hypertexts deliberately multiply and complicate narrative possibilities, supporting, troubling, and contradicting them. With *Annotations,* Ligon combines hypertext's function with its form, allowing the family album to function like memory, incorporating loose, ambiguous, open-ended connections and associations. *Annotations* rewards extended (re)consideration in the deconstruction of the culturally-iconic family album.

Viewers construct more nuanced, divergent conceptions of family from the multiple narratives. Ligon's hypertext annotations shatter the invisibility, blasé ignorance, and active exclusion of non-traditional narratives and subjectivities. The hypertext links become cracks where multiple other stories erupt, augmenting and de-centering normative discourses, forcing consideration of where discourses fail and what results from this failure of communication (Firstenberg, 2001). *Annotations* considers the complicated intersections of multiple subjectivities affecting discourses/silences around sexual identities, gender, and race; the complicity of the family album; and possible disruptions (Pinar, 2001; Tucker, n.d).

Much of Ligon's work involves fusing multimedia visual/verbal texts, forcing them to exceed their limitations, demanding deconstruction of dominant racial, sexual identity, and gender discourses. I entered *Annotations* familiar with Ligon's loosely autobiographical and symbolic investigations into multiple and intersecting marginalized subjectivities. While Ligon and I are both homosexual, it is one of our few obvious shared identities. Still, his work around his subjectivity makes me consider his experiences, and my own, inside and outside the context of dominant discourses.

On additional *Annotations* visits, I (re)read and (re)viewed the album focusing on it as someone else's family story, but inevitably comparing it to my own. The ruptures and radiating annotated hypertexts allow aspects of Ligon's multiple subjectivities and narratives into the family album. As I delved deeper into layers of hypertexts, I found increasingly personal texts, filled with more openness, raw vulnerability, assertion, and celebration.

While *Annotations* is a virtual family album, its form and contents feel familiar and comfortable. The nude on page 9 is jarring, inserting (homo)sex(uality) into the discourses of family. My embarrassment, blindness, avoidance, consideration, and eventual acceptance of this image within the main album narrative echoes coming to terms with my own sexual identity, as part of my family narrative. The hypertext annotations help me see how my stories and experiences can and do connect to my larger family narrative.

My major criticism of *Annotations* is the limited scope of hypertext and interactivity. Users can navigate different paths, but cannot add, delete, or alter the texts of the work. The work exists as a semi-bounded system; it does not hyperlink to any texts outside itself. While Ligon uses digital hypertexts to expand the narrative, content, and structural possibilities of the family album, he retains some sense of its previous format and function. Ligon also limits his deconstruction to several key marginalized subject positions. This narrows his direct impact, but increases the applicability of his model of artistically advocating for social justice.

Annotations provided me with a model for deconstructing family by creating hypermedia alter-narratives. Like Ligon's *Annotations*, my work functions as a process and product to deconstruct dominant identity discourses, providing evidence of transgressive/subversive subjects. Art educators, students, and artists, in turn, might see possibilities from the work of Ligon, Spence, and Flynn for creating *other* narratives of family and subjectivity.

The Impossibility of Deconstruction

Throughout this paper I present deconstruction as rupturing an idea, with resulting gaps offering space for alternative voices or views. I propose, unproblematically, that deconstruction allows a dismantling of dominant, oppressive discourses, and replaces them with more tolerant, diverse ones. This insinuation presents some issues. Does deconstruction

actually erase or nullify certain discourses? Does it merely replace one dominant discourse with another, as Black feminists argued some White feminists did? Do they reappear in other guises? Does changing terminology and categories result in actual material or behavioral improvements? While these questions remain unresolved, deconstruction is valuable in (re)imagining alternatives to oppressive cultural constructs.

Educational Implications

Deconstruction can offer a framework for developing critical thinking skills. Close examination—of ideas, visual cultural contexts, and alternative interpretations and representations—are processes to develop critical visual culture consumers and producers. This approach supports synthesizing information from multiple sources into a meaningful, aesthetically attentive, and polished work.

In *Annotations*, Ligon insists fluid subjectivities exceed traditional family photo album norms. He presents alternatives—diverse people in diverse families—i.e., effeminate young men and racially integrated families. Ligon's insertions create a space for difference. His multimedia digital family album presents a more contextualized and "disturbing" representation of family.

My family album deconstructions, like the other artists' examples, demonstrate a range of deconstruction possibilities. Online family album activities and projects become opportunities for investigating absences, exclusions, and alter-narratives, for finding reasons and ways to disrupt family definitions, documentation, and discourses. Online hypertextual structures support rhizomatic, nonlinear information, disrupting narrative conventions and discourses. Education can exploit these deconstruction strategies to model investigation without closure, only extension.

Meaning-making is the core of learning and art-making. This deconstructive approach supports the relevance of personally significant arts-based and inquiry-based education. We all approach discourse and representations of *family* differently. By using multimedia family artifacts in nonlinear arrangements we can develop new questions, focal points, and artistic solutions based on our own history and research through

"observation, questioning, experimentation and imagination" (Marshall, 2005, p. 231). Whether we call this *arts-based research* (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Eisner, 2006), *A/r/t/ography* (Irwin, et al, 2006; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004), or *art practice* (Sullivan, 2006), it is inquiry-based, learner-centered, and deals with big, relevant ideas and issues. We create a representation and interpretation, filtered through our own abilities, skills, and vision, to "make sense of the world" (Lynch, 2007, p. 33). Sullivan (2006) insists that art practices are research practices applicable to "personal and public ends" (p. 19).

Art educators Anniina Suominen Guyas (2007) and Seija Ulkuniemi (2008) advocate deconstructing family photos, customs, and histories/stories as educationally significant. Ulkuniemi's visual essay demonstrates her efforts "to engage people to view the family photograph with new eyes" (p. 76). Guyas' deconstruction involves active inquiry and retelling, essential components of self-reflection, personal understanding, and growth. Ligon's family album deconstruction and reconstruction, of content and format, criticizes and revises master identity narratives.

These artists disrupt master family narratives, demonstrating their absences and silences. By structuring the family album as a network, a tree of branching stories, we gain the authority to navigate outside traditional form and content norms. Digital hybridization, with hypertext to challenge and change sociocultural inequities, facilitates imagination. Hypertext family albums can be designed to promote social justice by envisioning possibilities; encouraging an awareness of multiple narratives and knowledges; and provide options for multiple, divergent discourses and subjectivities outside culturally-defined norms. They have the potential to include the photographer's lens and the conditions under which the picture was taken, to imagine the excluded and misrepresented, and the narratives around photographed events. Imagine changing representations of family in ways that allow the inclusion of multiple possibilities of sexual identities, genders, races, classes, and visions of what a contemporary family group can be.

For me, as an out lesbian mother, these artists stretch the previous culturally constructed bounds of family, including greater ranges of sexual identities and gender expressions. They open a space in *family* for other people, like me and my family, who fall outside traditional family

definitions and identities, disrupting the heterosexual, nuclear, patriarchal family structure narrative. We are actively (re)creating our own family, developing our own terminology as we go.

Digital tools facilitate the re-visioning of family as more inclusive. Representations of difference proliferate, infiltrating the culture in undeniable amounts and ways. I can now upload, share, access, and download an ever-broadening repository of family representations. Straight family and childhood friends now coo over online photos of my infant and four year old, and clamor for more (see Figures 4 and 5). They don't worry about our kids growing up with two mothers, or with my failure to adhere to gender norms. Really, so many of them have so few reservations anymore. This is hopeful.

Figure 4. Black Sheep

Figure 5. We are a Happy Family

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